Interview with CWO-4 Richard Roger Ware, Vietnam hospital corpsman assigned to 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 15 March 2005.

Where are you from?

Right here in Elkins, West Virginia. I live in a house right beside the place where I grew up. It's my parents' old place and I came back here because I call it home. I did 32 years in the military. I went in in November of '65 and came out on October 1st, 1997.

Did you also go to school in Elkins?

Yes. I'm a graduate of Elkins High School.

How did you join the Navy?

I actually got drafted in the Army in '65. A hometown friend of mine and I both got draft notices to report to the bus station on Tuesday morning at 7 o'clock to go to the AFEES [Armed Forces Entrance and Examination Station] for an induction physical. So to beat that, we had a couple of Navy friends who contacted the Navy recruiter. He came down, got us, and signed us up that same evening. So we beat the draft.

Did you go to boot camp at Great Lakes?

Yes. And turned right around and went to corps school at Great Lakes. Then after completing corps school, I went down to Naval Hospital Jacksonville, FL. I was there a few months. I was a ward corpsman and worked on Isolation taking care of people with tuberculosis and communicable diseases. We had a Marine who came there from the 7th Marines in Vietnam--Gary Sparks. He had malaria when he came. He gave me a book about Chesty Puller because I took care of him. That got my interest in the Marine Corps because of him telling stories about Vietnam. I was there at Jacksonville about 4 months. Then I got orders to report to Fleet Marine Force--Field Med--at Camp Lejeune at Monford Point.

Do you remember the training?

Yes. It was good training. I think we were there about 5 weeks. We had a lot of infantry training with the Marines. They showed us different combat tactics--ambushes, what a wedge formation was, how to support a fire team, how the Marines do their frontal assaults, defensive positions, how to shoot the old M14 and the .45 pistol, how to get our 782 gear--our deuce gear, as we called it--squared away. They wanted to make sure we were in good shape to go to Vietnam because we ran everywhere we went at Camp Lejeune--chow, classes, with the exception of hikes.

SGT Brandt was one of our platoon sergeants and was a Vietnam vet. He said, "Guys, I'm telling you. A lot of you guys are going straight to the Fleet Marine Force in Vietnam and you're gonna see a lot of combat so I'm trying to teach you to stay alive. So everything I'm teaching you now is gonna help you."

And he was exactly right. A lot of those guys went to 1st Marine Division, 3rd Marine Division, and 2nd Marine Division. You probably know that none of the guys in the 2nd Marine Division deployed to Vietnam. They were the alert force for the Atlantic Fleet and East Coast. So the only guys who actually deployed to Vietnam were the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions. If

you got orders to one of those FMF billets with 1st or 3rd Division, you were in for some heavy combat.

So you got some pretty good advice.

Yes. I look back on that . . . I made some good friends. Several of the guys I went to Monford Point with went to Vietnam. We all went together. I remember a lot of water at Camp Lejeune. This little sergeant--SGT Brandt--took us through a lot of that water. He actually enjoyed doing that. We didn't know what he was trying to do and we'd get mad at him. But I know what he was doing. We'd walk down the road and he'd yell, "Sniper!" And then we'd have to jump in the bushes and trees and learn how to provide cover fire in different directions. I think he was just preparing us to stay alive and how to use the different terrain and equipment to stay alive. The whole purpose of a corpsman is to stay alive--not be a hero--but to take care of the Marines in combat. Your primary mission is to protect yourself, but, at the same time, do your job.

They also taught us about the structure of the Marine Corps. They actually broke down the units from the division level all the way down to a squad. They explained to us what a fire team was, what a squad was, a platoon, a company, a battalion, regiment, all the way up the line. So we had a basic knowledge of how many guys were in a platoon and how the radio operator worked. We also learned how to use radios.

So if a radioman was hit, you could take over the radio and use it?

Yes. And I did that. When I got to Vietnam, I could use a radio. I could call in air strikes or artillery strikes. I could call in medevacs. I had a notebook in which I wrote down all the radio frequency codes. If something happened to the radioman, I could take over the radio and actually call in these frequencies and get the medevacs in, or any other mission.

The actual strength of a Marine platoon is 39 men. We were down to 19 men in a platoon at one time. If your radioman gets shot or something, the corpsman is right there. It's just normal that we would get right on that radio and call in the medevac. That was not unusual. I stood radio watch at night while in the field so the radio operator could get some sleep. I did this every night unless I was on an ambush.

So you were trained pretty much to take over any job in that squad or platoon.

A corpsman wouldn't take over as a platoon leader. In my company, the corpsman kept the backup frequencies in a code book so in case the radioman lost them or the platoon commander lost them, the corpsman always had them. As a matter of fact, I've got mine from Vietnam right in front of me. It's a little red notebook with all the frequencies for everything--battalion, artillery, the 106 batteries, 155 batteries. The frequency for air strikes, for medevacs. Many times they'd say, "Hey Doc. What's the frequency for Whiskey X-ray?" I'd look in my little book and say, "It's 47.10" That's the kind of stuff I would do. I'd be right next to the radioman and I'd dial in the frequency for another company or for a medevac because the RTO (Radio Transmission Operator) would have to take the radio off his back to adjust the frequency, so I'd just change it for him.

Did you get a lot of time on the rifle range?

We didn't get too much time. We went through the infiltration course. But we didn't get much time to fire. There wasn't that much time in training for that. We did snapping in and we got into different firing positions.

Snapping in meaning dry-firing and getting into shooting positions, locking and loading, that type of thing?

Exactly. How to get into position, how to calibrate the sights for distance. I don't believe we fired that much. I think we only fired for familiarization. We didn't have time to go beyond that.

And that was still the M14 and the .45 pistol.

Yes. And we had to practice breaking those down and reassembling them. And we had to go through speed drills and doing it blindfolded and at night. You know, different scenarios in case it was dark and you had to clean your weapon. We all learned to do it. It was good training. Of course, we never carried an M14 in Vietnam; we carried the .45. All corpsmen were issued the standard .45 pistol.

Did you get any practice with that?

We got to shoot about 50 rounds. I think we got to shoot a couple of clips of M14 and maybe 50 rounds of the .45. That was primarily just for familiarization. We weren't really there to qualify as experts. There just wasn't enough time to do that. This was '66 and Vietnam was going pretty heavy. They needed corpsmen in Vietnam pretty quickly to replace the ones who were being killed or wounded. So they got us through pretty quickly.

What about medical training?

We had medical training, too. We went through the different scenarios as far as compound fractures, sucking chest wounds, protruding abdomen, fractured jaw with an airway protection, and amputations. They also taught us how to do a trach, how to start IVS, how to apply different bandages, how to use litters and ponchos to carry people. It was a given that we had had a lot of the first aid training in basic corps school. So the training we had there was primarily for combat wounds. It wasn't the basic first aid. It was more the combat wounds. And also we learned to take care of burns, give fluids, and take care of heat casualties, how to use salt pills.

We also practiced getting in and out of helos. Those were the old H-34 helos. We also learned how to load and unload casualties into or out of the helos.

After training was completed, we were bussed up to Cherry Point and flew Frontier Airlines all the way to San Francisco.

So you say you got on the Frontier Airlines plane.

We flew to Frisco and then bused to Travis. Then we had to wait there for a manifest. We flew there by commercial airline to Okinawa.

I know that later on when corpsmen went to Vietnam, they went as individual replacements. They didn't go with a unit. Did you go as a unit or as a replacement?

Once we got to Okinawa we stayed there a few days. I had orders to the 1st Marine Division. I had no idea where I was going. We flew from Okinawa down on a C-130 to the airbase at Danang. After we off loaded, we went to the barracks there. A first class corpsman from the Division Surgeon's office came by and got all the orders from all the corpsmen. Then he said he'd be back the following day to give us our assignments.

The next day he returned and said, "As I call your name off, this is where you're going. I went to 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Several of us went there--maybe six or seven of us, maybe more. There were probably about 200 corpsmen. That whole group of people coming from Okinawa were primarily corpsmen. Once we were assigned, we all went our separate ways. I think they went through and figured out how many corpsmen they needed in certain units who had been killed or medevaced out. I think they put most of them in units where the corpsmen had been killed and needed replacements.

That was a monthly draft. It didn't happen every day. They got in a draft every month. As the Field Med Schools graduated, they were sending guys to Vietnam. It seemed like the folks from Lejeune went to 1st Division and the guys from Field Med in Pendleton went to 3rd Division.

So now you had your assignment with 2/5.

Yes. We got word that they were down at Chu Lai so we went over to the air terminal and caught a helo down to Chu Lai.

When was this?

It was in early November of '66. When we got to Chu Lai, we hitchhiked to where our unit was. We came to find out that they assigned us to different companies. My company was up at the DMZ on "Operation Prairie."

How did you find your unit?

Our rear element was down at Chu Lai on Hill 69 at An Ton Bridge. I went there. Our medical chief was Chief Presley. He assigned certain corpsmen to certain units. I was assigned to Foxtrot company which was up on the DMZ. I had to wait a couple of days to catch a flight up to Dong Ha and was then assigned to my company.

What do you remember about that?

The first thing you encountered in Vietnam was the heat and the humidity. It was so hot and your clothes stuck to you. I remember getting off that plane at Danang and saying, "It is damn hot!"

Reporting to my company was kind of frightening but at the same time it was challenging. It gave me a feeling that I finally belonged to a unit. A lot of us corpsmen and Marines went to Vietnam with the feeling that we were invincible, that nothing would ever happen to us. It would always happen to someone else because the impact had not reached us yet. We hadn't seen combat.

At Danang, we were joking that we'd all come back together 13 months in the future. Well, that's not the way it was.

When I got to the company, they accepted me right away. It was instant respect and yet I hadn't done anything. Because my name was Doc, I was just living off the respect of the corpsman who had been there before. I thought it was good that I had instant respect and hadn't earned it. It was so awesome to be accepted by the Marines and here I had just arrived in-country. Lots of times Marines would report to their units and the weren't accepted right away. They had to earn that right. But the majority of the Marines in my unit accepted me just because I was there. They knew what the value of a corpsman was. They had been in combat and had

lost people. They had their buddies severely wounded. And the corpsmen came through for them.

But they lost corpsmen, too. Corpsmen were some of the bravest people out there. People didn't always get hit in secure areas. Your job was to get to that wounded Marine and get him under cover or do what you can. You'd do your job and the Marines did their best to protect you.

There were times I found it very frustrating in Vietnam. Let's say you were on a patrol and a booby trap or a mine went off and there was a guy who had been severely wounded--an amputation, a gunshot wound, or multiple blast injuries. As you were trying to patch that guy up and do what you could for him, at the same time, you may have had three or four other guys wounded.

Many times I would be the only corpsman in my platoon. Normally you had eight corpsmen to a line company. That's two corpsmen per platoon. But many times, we'd be down to three or four corpsmen per company--one for each platoon. Sometimes you had so many wounded Marines in a good battle or firefight that you didn't even get to them until the medevacs were there. Most of the time, you didn't even have time to fill out the medical tags. Those tags were made from paper and it was humid. Lots of times you were in rice paddies and mud or it was raining, or a monsoon. So you'd get a guy who was wounded and you were expected to fill out the tag and make it readable. Lots of times you didn't even get a chance to do that because you'd be going from one guy to another. Was it more important to save a guy's life or do the paperwork documenting what you did?

As soon as the guy was hit, the word went out, "Doc, what kind of medevac do you need? What priority?" Emergency meant as soon as you could get one. Routine meant some time today. Priority meant about 2 hours. And you wouldn't know when a helo was inbound. You may have had plenty of time to work on a guy or a bunch of wounded. But often times you had so many wounded people, you didn't get to all of them. Then all of a sudden, a medevac is inbound. And they didn't always land exactly where you were. It might land in the middle of a rice paddy and you had to drag those guys out to where the helo was, many times under fire.

Many times we'd just carry our wounded in ponchos or grab their clothes and drag them out to the helo. You'd have three or four Marines help you. But you'd always go. As you stood right beside the helo, bullets would be coming in. If you were in a hot LZ, almost every medevac was under fire coming in and you were out there in that LZ getting shot at.

What was it like waiting for a helo? All of a sudden, the enemy heard the chopper coming in. And they knew it was going to come in into the wind. So if you were the enemy, you would want to take that chopper down because it was big and you could see it. And if you were the enemy, that was quite an achievement to knock down a helo. It certainly was more important than shooting one person.

When that helo was inbound and you saw it, you started moving the casualty to that helo. And you didn't care whether it was under fire or not. You just wanted to get him there, get him in that helo, and give him a chance to live.

Many times there would be guys wounded all over the place and if you were the only corpsman, you didn't have a chance to get to all of them. Often they'd just throw them on the helo without me even getting to them or treating them. I remember people with multiple amputations. I'd be trying to get an IV into them because they were in such shock. I'd hear that a medevac was on the way. But 3 hours might have gone by and I was trying to keep the patient alive as best I could.

What made it even more difficult for me was that I knew these people. I'd spent a lot of time with them and they were my friends. And here I was a corpsman in Vietnam 18 or 19 years old and I had guys' lives in my hands that 30- and 40-year-old surgeons would be treating later. Yet as the corpsman, I was out there as the first caregiver. That's something you never thought about until after it was over. There were many times that I wished that I had better training or better supplies to take care of those guys.

When you got to your unit, did you get into combat right away?

Yes. We were involved in Operation Prairie up near Con Thien right by the DMZ. We got sniper fire almost every day. That operation lasted 53 days starting in September and ending toward the end of November 1966.

Did you see a lot of casualties right away?

Not right away but I saw several wounded. We didn't see too many until we crossed the river. That's when we got a lot of casualties. That was a rude awakening. Now I knew what World War II was all about.

You were trying to control your own fear. A guy is wounded and wounded badly. You were trying to control your own stress and fear because until you got to the casualty you wouldn't know what kind of injury he had. And when you got there, you'd think, "Wow. Oh my God, what's this guy got?" It was difficult to look at a friend of yours that you knew for months and see that he had his legs blown off or with massive blast injuries. You'd work as quick as you could and do the best you could. And you were rushing, doing as much as you could as fast as you could. And sometimes, it seemed as though you just weren't doing enough, particularly when he had multiple amputations. You were trying to put tourniquets on and do what you could. All the while, you were wondering what to do next. You went through checks in your mind. What to do next? The wounded would ask, "How bad am I, Doc?" Many times you'd lie to them to give them hope to live.

If you had two casualties exactly the same, you might not have treated them exactly the same. It all depended where you were and what the conditions were. Was he lying in a rice paddy? Were you under fire or being mortared? The wounded would often be scared and excited, in shock or disbelief that they got hit. You'd talk to them, always trying to calm them down while trying to control your own stress without losing control because of the nature/extent of wounds.

Do you recall what was contained in your Unit 1?

Many different size dressings--large, medium, small. We had scissors, tourniquets, morphine syrettes. I think I had about 10 syrettes of morphine, maybe more. I geared up my Unit 1 to where I was going and how many days I was going to be out. If we were going on a major operation, I'd take extra supplies in my pack. I might take 20 syrettes of morphine. My initial outfit contained two cans of serum albumin. I'd have two large battle dressings, gauze for burns, [copper sulphate] powder for willy peter [white phosphorus] burns, petroleum jelly gauze for burns. We also had atropine syrettes in case they used nerve gas on us. We never used them but I had them. There was a bunch of Ace wraps and Band Aids. I also had a pen light, tongue blades, oral airway, Q Tips, 4 x 4s, 2 x 2s, eye patches, wire splints, and slings. Then I had a medical book I wrote in an ink pen. It was a coupon-type book that had medical tags with carbon copies. You could wire that to a person's collar. There were medicines for diarrhea and

upset stomach. There was also Tylenol for headaches, muscle relaxers, antihistamines, eye drops, and malaria pills. There was Bacitracin ointment. I had some Tetracaine ointment for burns. There was also some merthiolate, a few salt tablets, and some calamine lotion. There were a couple of scissors. I carried lots of moleskin and tape for blisters. We were supposed to have a nylon litter but we found them useless. You were better off just putting a guy on a poncho and dragging him out. By the time you got that litter folded out . . . Combat doesn't happen when you have a guy shot one an hour. You might get 20 in 3 or 4 minutes. I never used that nylon litter even one time. Then I carried at least one body bag in your pack.

What about a surgical kit?

We had a surgical kit with suture needles, prep blades, a scissors, forceps, tweezers, probe, a knife handle. It was called a minor surgical kit. It went inside one of the pouches of the Unit 1.

It sounds like you had so much stuff that you probably had to put some of it in other than your Unit 1.

I carried extra supplies in ammo bags.

What about halazone for purifying water?

Each person had halazone tablets in their individual pouch on the web belt. Each Marine had two bottles of halazone tablets, 100 tablets per bottle. Each Marine also carried a little first aid in back on his web belt. There were a couple of medium and a few small dressings and a tourniquet in that. The pouch was about 4 inches high and about 4 inches wide.

What other kind of gear did you carry?

A flak jacket and four canteens. I had two canteens hooked on my flak jacket and another two canteens hooked onto the web belt. I carried a K-Bar, a .45, and four clips for the pistol. Then there was my Unit 1 and my pack with C-rats and extra gear. Each person in our unit also had to carry either 100 or 200 rounds of machine gun ammo. If there was one M60 machine gun, each man carried a hundred-round belt. If there were two machine guns, each guy carried two 100-round belts. In addition, I carried smoke grenades for the medevacs, an E-tool (shovel), and a poncho.

What color smoke did you pop for medevacs?

Usually yellow smoke. Red smoke meant enemy. We would let them know what color smoke we would pop. I also carried frag grenades and a cleaning kit for my .45 in my pack, C-rats, extra socks, a long-sleeved shirt, and an extra pair of trousers if we were going to be out in the field for 5 or 6 days.

And you probably carried bug juice for the insects.

Yes. You might have three or four plastic bottles of insect repellent. It never worked but we carried it and used it.

You were loaded down for bear.

I once weighed my stuff. I carried 82 pounds plus the helmet.

When you talk about 782 gear, I was told that the 782 referred to the paperwork. It was a Form 782 which included what constituted that gear.

Exactly.

Was what you just described to me part of the 782 gear?

Your basic 782 gear included your pack, web belt, four green plastic canteens, flak jacket, helmet, pistol, pistol holster, K-Bar and sheath, first aid pouch, E-tool, and C-rats. And we were also issued what was called your "rubber lady," an air mattress. But we never carried the mattresses in the field. We were also issued a blanket, poncho, and shelter half with poles and rope. There was also a willy peter bag, a nylon bag about the size of sea bag in which you could pack all your gear to store in the rear.

The willy peter bag didn't have anything to do with white phosphorus?

No. When we were on patrol, we carried our ponchos rolled up and tied below our packs. I usually carried extra supplies in my pack such as three extra cans of serum albumin, three or four extra large dressings, two or three extra tourniquets, a handful of small dressings, extra salt tabs because my job was to give them out. And I'd carry extra Tylenol, aspirin, sunburn ointment, malaria pills, and merthiolate. I also carried an ammo bag to hold extra supplies. Let's say a guy hit a mine and got a massive blast injury. He might have 20 wounds! You might use your large dressings and a couple of tourniquets on his amputations, and five or six other dressings. Bang. You might use your whole load right there on one man. There were a lot of mines and booby traps where we were.

So you'd take care of him, the medevac would come in and medevac him and other casualties out, and then you'd move out to finish your patrol.

It was not unusual to walk 20 to 30 miles a day on patrol. One time our M-79 [grenade launcher] guy was killed and I ended up carrying his M-79 with about 30 rounds. That was the biggest mistake I ever made. We had a 12-mile speed hump and I was the last guy who came in. Occasionally I carried a shotgun or an M14 on ambushes. If we captured enemy weapons, I'd help carry these out.

When you were in Vietnam, they were just making the transition from the M14 to the M16.

Yes. I think they made that about April of '67 when we changed over to the M16.

And then there were lots of problems with it.

We had a lot of guys in our unit who complained about them. I think that was because they weren't familiar with them and didn't know how to clean them. We were used to the M14, which you could lay in the mud and it would still fire. You took that M16 and it would rust and jam. They had the biggest problem with shells jamming in the chamber and they couldn't get them out. You'd try to get them out with a cleaning rod and it wouldn't work. A few guys lost their lives in firefights because of those problems. In fact, some of the guys in my company had to testify before a board about those weapons. And they didn't have anything good to say about them.

But I never carried an M16. My standard weapon was a .45 which I carried in a shoulder holster.

Did you ever have any occasion to use it?

Yes. I fired a few rounds. I never shot any NVA, but I did shoot at a couple of Viet Cong during operation Tuscaloosa in January '67 to protect my patient. But every time we got in a firefight and no one was wounded, I'd be out there shooting it just to shoot it at the enemy.

How long were you in the field altogether?

I was out there 8 months with Fox and Hotel Companies. I probably spent more time than any other corpsman in the field because I'd also be a line relief from BAS if a company needed a corpsman.

Wow. That was a long time to be in the field.

You stayed in a line company until your replacement came. But if another company needed a replacement in the meantime, they would go there and you just stayed out an extra month. We got new corpsmen the first week of every month. So if you lost a corpsman, they might pull a corpsman from another company to augment your company. But when I relocated back to the BAS, I became a "floater." Since I was a field corpsman with a lot of experience, I would rotate to different companies. If a corpsman got medevaced out or got killed or wounded, and they needed a new one for a few weeks, I'd go to that company until the next draft of corpsmen came in.

But going back to the rear didn't necessarily mean you were safe. I flew lots of medevacs. If they needed a corpsman to go on a MEDCAP to a village, I'd go. Our call sign at the BAS was Grasshopper 16. They'd call in, "Grasshopper 16, this is Flight line. Need a corpsman for a medevac. Do you have one available?" And the chopper would land right down there at Medical and I'd go out there and take off with it.

Do you remember any of those flights?

Oh, yeah. I remember quite a few of them. I'd ride out in a helo somewhere in the field and wouldn't know where I was. I wouldn't be hooked in to the flight helmet. I'd just be a body inside that helo. We'd land in an LZ someplace or a field or a rice paddy. The next thing I'd know they'd be bringing a guy up and throwing him on the helo and then we'd take off. Then I'd do my job. It might be starting an IV, maybe doing CPR on the guy, maybe checking him for more injuries. Or maybe there were three, four, or five casualties who had never been treated on the ground. So now I'd be treating them as the helo was flying back to 1st Medical Battalion. Many times I'd have to sleep on the floor at 1st Med or hitch hike a ride to the air terminal and sleep on the floor at night waiting for a ride back to my base.

As I mentioned before, when the helos landed, I'd get out and see the bullet holes. I remember one day, April 22nd, 1967. We had four guys shot.

What happened?

I took care of four guys that day who were wounded. A helo came in and picked them up, then got shot up. SGT Eddy was one of those guys. When he got shot that particular day, he didn't want to be medevaced because he was a weapons platoon sergeant. A bullet came in. He was about 3 feet to my left. I could have put out my left hand and touched him. I was taking care of one of our squad leaders who had been shot.

Hotel Company had humped all night to be in a position to assault a fortified VC village. The next morning at daybreak we had crossed the river and had the river on our left side as a blocking force and a platoon across the river to our point as a blocking force. We took two

platoons on line and swept through the village pushing the enemy out. When we got to the edge of the village we were going to pivot and swing back through. And just then the NVA opened us on us and the initial blast knocked down three guys. One was about 50 meters away. I ran up to him and dragged him back to the line. That was CPL Hyziak. Then when I dragged him back to the trench, I was beside SGT Eddy. Then snipers were shooting at us. I heard the sniper's bullet actually hit the right front of SGT Eddy's helmet and knock him out. I thought he was killed because I saw him fall. We were then in the trench line firing at the enemy up in the trees and hills.

I yelled out, "SGT Eddy! SGT Eddy!" He didn't respond so I figured he was dead. There was another guy about 30 meters directly out in front of me who had been shot in the jaw--LCPL Rodger Evans. I went out, patched him up, and dragged him back in. By the time I got him back to the trench, SGT Eddy started waking up and saying, "What in the hell happened to me?" He didn't know he'd been shot. He was dazed and confused and tried to get up. So I jumped on him and held him down because we were still under fire. He thought I was fighting him. It was funny in a way. At least now it seems funny. As he was trying to get loose from me, I kept yelling at him to lay still. Finally, he realized what was going on.

I checked him over as he had been knocked out for about 20 or 30 minutes. I told him he had earned a Purple Heart. I told him we would medevac him on the next flight coming in. He then said, "No, I'm not leaving. I'm not bleeding. These other guys are wounded. I'm not leaving my men. That's the way it is."

I said, "Listen. I want you to get that medevac because I don't feel like taking care of you." I didn't have time to worry about him. He may have had a concussion or something worse. The platoon sergeant--SGT Bud--let him stay, and I looked out for him over the next few days.

In the meantime, I heard someone yell, "Corpsman up!" on the other side of the field. It was my other corpsman--Hilton Goodman. He had been shot in the back and had a collapsed lung. I crawled out and patched him up and dragged him back about half way. Then some Marines came out and helped me drag him in the rest of the way into the trench. There was also another guy out there that Goodman had taken care of. When the helo came in, those four guys were loaded aboard and medevaced out. Eddy stayed behind. He didn't get counted as a combat wound, as it was not reported.

He had been trying to find me ever since 1967. He found me in March of 2002 on the Internet. There's a 2/5 website and I had posted an article on there about a pig we had captured one night. I asked if anyone remembered what happened that night and SGT Eddy read that story. He asked me what date he had been wounded and I told him April 22, 1967. He wanted to know how I remembered that. I told him I had it written down in my little red notebook. I recently wrote a report to Headquarters Marine Corps to document his injury and he was awarded a Purple Heart.

I had just helped put those guys aboard when I heard the bullets striking the helo. It had landed in a little valley and the North Vietnamese were on the high ground shooting down on the helo. I just prayed and hoped I didn't get hit. We got them to the helo as quick as we could, loaded them aboard, and then got it out of there.

By the way, it was shot up so bad that some of the guys on it were reinjured. They had to land at An Hoa and change helos before it went to 1st Med Battalion.

The guys you might want to talk to are any of those flight corpsmen that did those medevacs. They were the bravest guys I knew over there. That's a job I would not have wanted.

It's bad enough being a grunt corpsman but flying those medevacs. . . those guys got my respect. Every NVA whose got a rifle or an RPG is shooting at those helos coming in. There was nowhere to go in those helos. If you were in there, that was it. A lot of them got shot down and a lot of corpsmen were killed in helo crashes.

So, you say you were considered a "floater" and you'd be back in the battalion aid station. And if they needed a corpsmen to go on a medevac they'd pick you.

HMC Lou Legarie was our battalion chief. He'd be the one who'd yell, "There's a medevac coming in. Get your gear!" And I knew what that meant. I'd be out there in that LZ waiting to get aboard that helo. Lou and I have got a bond ever since then. As the battalion chief, Lou tried his best to pick certain corpsmen for certain evolutions. I think he took the best people we had because he didn't like to put inexperienced people in certain situations. New guys coming in got their time in line companies and they did the best they could.

The biggest thing I always worried was going on a medevac mission at night. You couldn't see. I had no idea where I was going. There were no lights on when a helo began going down into an LZ at night. We just hoped to goodness there were no trees down there. We were being talked down by the radioman on the ground. When I was inside those helos, all I had on was my flak jacket and my gear. The gunners had those reinforced armor vests and some extra protection around the machine guns but if you stood in those doorways, there was no extra protection. It was a hairy feeling being in a helo like that.

In my case, I controlled my fear. I actually was afraid until the helo landed. Then instinct took over and I did my job. When you were doing your job you never worried about getting shot down. The fear went away. It was the same fear I felt in combat. When I was on patrol, I always worried about something happening that I could never take care of. When I saw some of those injuries I would be in such shock myself. No matter how much I'd seen, it was never the same. But, as I said, instinct took over.

I used to train corpsmen myself after Vietnam. I'd tell them, "Whenever you go up to a casualty, get down beside him and put your hands on him. That takes your fear away. Now you're doing something. If you sit there and look at him, fear might take over and you might not do what you need to do. Once you put your hands on him, you'll know what to do."

At night I had to feel for the injuries. I might have had a red flashlight but I wouldn't want to use it at night because I didn't want the enemy to see where I was. My biggest fear at night was that one guy would trip a mine and maim everybody around him. And I might be one of them. I also wondered what would have happened if I got hit. Who would take care of me?

Whenever I heard a Marine yelling, "Corpsman up!" I'd actually be running before I heard that cry. Imagine what it must have been like. You're on patrol and suddenly a mine goes off. Everybody stops in their tracks except one guy. One guy is moving. That's the corpsman. So if you were the enemy and you saw one guy running, that told you he was the corpsman. And you might have to run a quarter of a mile to get to somebody. I'd actually be cussing. I had just come through that rice paddy maybe waist-deep in water. Now I'd have run back through it to get to somebody. And you couldn't run that fast in the mud with all your gear on. You just hoped you'd get there in time to do some good.

What was your rank at this time?

When I first got there I was an E-3, an HN. Then I got picked up for third class. I left Vietnam as an E-5, a second class. I had done my time at Jacksonville and was in line to get picked up for 3rd class. That was in April of '67.

What do you remember about leaving Vietnam?

The day I was leaving, my old company--Hotel Company--was out on a patrol and got in a firefight. A helo came in to fly me to Danang and I didn't want to go. Lou LeGarie had talked to me and said, "Country. You take care of yourself. We'll cross paths again, I'm sure."

I really did not want to leave because I felt guilty that I was a survivor and I felt that my job was there. I still had friends there and felt I could make a difference. I tried every way I could to stay with that unit but it didn't work out. I lost a lot of friends in Hotel Company. When I left, it was very emotional because I knew I wouldn't see a lot of those guys again. And they were in combat and I wasn't. I felt guilty because they were still there. That's a tough thing when you leave like that because you bonded with those people. You were in combat with them.

Did you go back to Danang?

Yes. I flew back to Danang and stayed there for a few days. Then I flew out to Okinawa and then got orders to Norfolk.

How long were you in-country?

Thirteen months.

So you went back to Norfolk--to the hospital?

No. I went to the Naval Supply Center next to the piers for a few months. Then I went to the Cheatham Annex at Williamsburg, VA. They needed corpsmen there to take care of Civil Service and military. I was there for about a year and a half.

How did you end up going back to Vietnam?

When my time was up in November of '69 I was discharged from the Navy. I then went into the Reserves. I had been out for about 4 months and then applied to return to active duty. But I had to put in another application because I went past 90 days. I came back on active duty in July of '71.

But you were still USNR.

Yes. I came back as an E-5. Then I went to Anacostia Naval Air Station in Washington, DC, and volunteered to go back to Vietnam. I got orders to Helicopter Attack Light Squadron-3--(HAL-3)--down in the Mekong Delta. They were called the Sea Wolves. It was a special squadron created by ADM Zumwalt. He created two special squadrons to patrol the riverine area below Saigon in the Mekong Delta. Our primary job was to ferry South Vietnamese Rangers in on air assaults and to provide convoy security up and down the Mekong River. We also flew interdiction missions up into Cambodia. We were to back up the so-called Brown Water Navy. I was out of Binh Thuy down below Can Tho way down in the Delta.

Here is the irony about the whole thing. When I knew I had orders there, they sent me to SERE [Search, Evade, Resist, Escape] School out in Coronado Amphibious Base and at Warner Springs, CA. It was challenging and I enjoyed it. I'd been in Vietnam. I could speak Vietnamese. I knew all the customs--everything about Vietnam that you could possibly learn.

Every guy going either as a pilot or air crew who had the potential of being shot down, had to go through SERE School. There were about 360 of us going. We spent a week up in the mountains at a "prison camp."

Where was that?

It was at Warner Springs in the mountains about 70 miles above San Diego. It was a simulated prisoner of war camp. In January of '68 three things happened--Tet, the USS *Scorpion* was missing off Norfolk, and the USS *Pueblo* was captured off North Korea. Two of the instructors we had were from the *Pueblo*. They told us how the North Koreans had tortured them. There were also training aids--films from World War II. I thought it was good training. But until I went up to Warner Springs, I thought it all was a waste of my time. I hadn't learned anything until I got into that prisoner of war camp. That was totally different.

What kind of practical training did they give you there?

They took about 360 people and trucked us up there. Then they told us, "You've got until 6 o'clock tomorrow night to make it to Freedom Village which is an old fort about 20 miles from here. And if you do, you get your choice of an apple or an orange to eat."

I made it the 20 miles without being captured. I made it to Freedom Village and felt good. I was the number two guy in. There were 19 of us out of the 360 who made it without being captured.

Eventually, everyone went into prison camp and they tried to make you realize that you were an actual prisoner. You don't get any sleep while you're there. You were in a bamboo cage. Imagine about 360 or so guys in bamboo cages. By the morning of the fourth day, I really believed I was a prisoner. They played music all night and kept you awake. They pounded on your cages, and took you out to interrogate you or use simulated torture techniques. It was very good training and I'm glad I went through it. And then I went to Vietnam.

What was that second tour like? How did you feel when you got in-country?

It was different because I had been there before. I flew in a C-130 down to Can Tho. I looked down and saw all these American tractors in the middle of rice fields. I thought, "What in the hell?" These were brand new farm tractors--hundreds of them! They couldn't use them in rice fields because they'd just bog down. It really irritated me.

When I got to Binh Thuy, the squadron was sponsoring an orphanage in a little village about 15 miles away. We took care of the kids and sort of adopted them.

A few months after that, these same orphans stole a field ambulance and crashed through the gate at the Army compound at Can Tho. They blew up a whole bunch of helos on the airstrip. There were sappers in the back of that ambulance. It turned out that these were Vietnamese kids from that orphanage.

They were working for the VC?

They were. And that stopped our support for the orphanage.

It was a different situation with HAL-3 because I was flying aircrew a lot. We had a lot of helos go down. And we had a lot of drug overdoses, too. We had a large number of personnel who died from overdoses of cocaine and heroin in that squadron.

Where were they getting it from?

From their Vietnamese girlfriends. Right down the road from us were the big Army base at Can Tho. There was a little R&R center at Ben Xe Moi and all kinds of Vietnamese prostitutes who worked there. Imagine. You could take 5 dollars American and buy . . . Take the end digit joint of your little finger and make that a full thimbleful of pure uncut heroin. That's what you could get for 5 bucks! Their girlfriends were buying this heroin for them and getting these guys hooked on it. I remember getting a call from the barracks and we'd find a guy there passed out. We'd go up there and he would have OD'd on heroin. We'd take him right across the road to the U.S. Army 3rd Surgical Hospital, which was right next to us, and he'd be pronounced dead. We had several of those.

When was this?
It was '71--'72.

Your biggest job as a corpsman was just keeping these crews healthy?
Yes. We had one flight surgeon with HAL-3. ADM Zumwalt created another squadron called VAL-4. It was Light Attack Squadron 4. They flew Marine Corps OV-10 Broncos. They used these for convoy security. Right across the river we had Naval Support Activity Binh Thuy. They had a bunch of riverine boats over there. We had an aeromedical dispensary at Binh Thuy with about 15 flight corpsmen, a little mini-dispensary. We also had Vietnamese nurses in that dispensary who helped us.

The biggest job we had with HAL-3 was flying various missions including medevac missions and taking care of the health of about 800 men in that squadron. Plus I was one of the corpsmen assigned to provide support to 1st Angilco, which was operating in the Mekong Delta.

How did a medevac mission down there differ from what you had been used to up north on your first tour?
The terrain was different. Down there most of it was waterways. You might pick up a guy in a riverine boat who might have been ambushed or been attacked. We'd land somewhere close by and load him on the helo. But most of the medevacs were of Vietnamese rangers who may have been injured. We also did a lot of humanitarian missions. Occasionally, we'd support the 9th Armored Division.

We had nine detachments with HAL-3 at different locations in the Mekong Delta. We had two UH-1 Hueys at each location. So we had 18 helos. We had about 60 helos back at our main base at Binh Thuy. When we left in '72, we turned all those helos over to the Vietnamese.

Do you remember any particular mission that stands out more than any other?
We had a transport helicopter go down that had 26 people on it. We had to go out and secure that. Many times we'd go to aircraft recover sites. A helo would be shot down and we'd go there to recover the bodies. Another mission was when Dr. Steve Rodgers (VAL-4 flight surgeon) and I flew down into the Delta about 200 miles to provide medical support for a Vietnamese Ranger fire support base which was due to be hit during the night. We flew part-way in an OV-10 Bronco and the rest in stages from Army and Vietnamese helicopters. It was hairy as hell on this mission.

Did you ever have to pick up casualties from those PBRs that patrolled the Delta waterways?

I didn't personally. Whatever detachment of our squadron was closest to the mission would go pick them up. Usually, two helos would go, one as the primary and another as secondary providing cover. We also flew over many of the waterways searching for sampans and boats that the patrol craft couldn't get to and search. Many times we'd be calling in information to the gunboats.

How long were you in the Delta altogether?

I wasn't there that long . I got there in October and left in April of '72. That squadron was decommissioned. I tried to extend in-country but they wouldn't let me. I came back to Norfolk to an aircraft squadron.

Do you ever hear from any of the men you were in the helicopter squadron with?

No. I haven't run across anyone in HAL-3. I remember our surgeon was LT Steve Hazen. He was our flight surgeon for HAL-3.

What was the name of the squadron you reported to in Norfolk?

I went to VRF-31 at the Air Station in Norfolk. I was a flight corpsman for 2 years. I got orders to MST [Medical Service Technique] School at Portsmouth. That was 9 months. After that, I went to school in Portsmouth. From there I went to USS *Mississinewa* (AO-146), an oiler out of Norfolk. I was aboard about a year and a half and we got decommissioned.

Then I got orders to USS *Boulder* (LST-1190), an LST out of Little Creek, VA. I was on that ship about a year and a half. Then I got orders to Marine Air Control Squadron 23, 4th Marine Air Wing, Aurora, Colorado. I was a flight corpsman there for three squadrons.

Were you still USNR at this point or did you go back to USN?

I was USN. I was chief then. In fact, I made senior chief out there. I was there 3 years then I went to USS *Pensacola* (LSD-38) out of Little Creek. I was on that about a year and a half before getting orders to PA school. I was accepted to the Navy's commissioned chief warrant officer PA program. I got commissioned and then went to Pensacola for a few months, then to Medical Clinic Quantico, VA. While I was there, I was assigned to OCS as a PA for 7 straight years.

The biggest thing was the impact I had on reducing training injuries in officer candidates. Before I went there, we had hundreds of cases of heat casualties per year. When I got there, we revolutionized how we forced water-loading in candidates.

Did you retire from Quantico?

No. I was there for 7 years and then went to USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71) for 2 years and we were in the Persian Gulf War. I was on it from '90 to '92. I was the ship's PA. When I came back, I went back to the Basic School at Quantico. Now I was taking care of second lieutenants. I taught them how to use their corpsmen in combat situations.

So you retired from there?

Right. I retired in October 1997 as a CWO-4. I was the last commissioned warrant PA in the Navy to retire.

What have you been doing since then?

I do a lot of volunteer work. I'm the senior vice commandant for our Marine Corps League here in Elkins. We've got about 50 members. I also volunteer to help out with income taxes for the community and do business consulting. I belong to all the military service organizations including VFW, DAV, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, and other civic organizations. I help these groups with volunteer work or function as an officer in most.

It's been many years since you were in Vietnam. Do you ever think about that time much anymore?

Oh, yes. All the time. Certain things come up on television that I criticize. I also criticize movies I see. I have helped a lot of people with PTSD. I've talked to a lot of people who have PTSD. I've helped a lot of guys file claims with the VA. Once you are in combat with people, you're bonded for life. It's always there. It's definitely a band of brothers.

I want to thank you very much for spending time with me this afternoon. I need one thing more from you, your address.

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